

Insider Insight

Creating Brand Ambassadors: How to Help Employees Promote the Brand

By Jennifer Schade

While attending a market research seminar recently, I noticed the mobile phone company employee sitting next to me pull out her phone to place a call. I commented that the phone was made by one of her employer's competitors. "Oh, I don't actually use our phones," she laughed. "Too unreliable."

It's unlikely that any of the people who overheard her comment will ever buy one of the phones that her company makes either.

An organization's brand is one of its most valuable assets and what differentiates it in the marketplace. As this story illustrates, the brand promise that an organization makes to consumers is not only delivered through products and services, but also through the behaviors of the employees — or brand ambassadors — who represent the brand with every move.

Employee brand advocacy is a competitive advantage. The power of employees who are truly engaged as brand advocates is difficult for competitors to replicate.

So, how does an organization successfully engage employees to understand the brand and act as advocates on its behalf?

Advocacy Starts with Leadership

If top leadership within an organization lives and breathes the brand, employees are much more likely to embrace it as well. Communication professionals can assist their leadership by encouraging them to communicate about the brand and share examples of how they bring the brand to life.

In *Building Strong Brands*, author David A. Aaker provides a powerful example of how Mike Harper, president of ConAgra Foods, led that organization's brand evolution. After suffering a heart attack, Harper realized that he needed to adopt a healthier lifestyle. When he examined the foods that ConAgra and

others made, he was surprised to learn of their high fat content. As a result, Harper decided that ConAgra Foods would develop and market more nutritious and healthy products in the form of the Healthy Choice brand of frozen dinners.

Give Employees Information

Employees can't be brand advocates if they don't understand the brand. Therefore, it's important to communicate the organization's brand to employees — both implicitly and explicitly.

Key messages about an organization's brand should be integrated into communication vehicles, including the employee newsletter, intranet, emails, voicemails, speeches and town hall meetings. For example, The Body Shop brand is committed to being environmentally friendly. Employees receive updates on the environment through training courses and newsletters and are also encouraged to share what they learn with others.

"Live" the Brand

Once employees understand the organization's brand, it is critical to provide them with tangible ways to be brand advocates. At Yahoo!, some employees allow their vehicles to be painted with the Yahoo! logo. This might seem extreme to some, so it is important that employees have options so they can choose a brand advocacy role they feel comfortable with. They could volunteer in the community on company time or share a perspective about the company brand with new employees.

Recognize Brand Advocates

It's important to shine the spotlight on employees who are bringing the brand to life within the organization. This encourages brand advocates to keep up the good work and also shares examples to inspire others. These employees can be featured in employee newsletters and the intranet. At Southwest Airlines, Colleen

Barrett, former president and COO, recognized employees who brought the brand to life in "Colleen's Corner," a monthly column that runs online and in *Spirit*, the airline's in-flight magazine.

Explore Brand Understanding

A brand is only as strong as its advocates, so it's important to keep a pulse on brand awareness across the organization. Consider holding focus groups on a regular basis to help explore employees' understanding of the organization's brand and identify which characteristics of the organization's brand are most meaningful.

For example, JRS Consulting tested a multimillion dollar advertising campaign that positioned a global travel organization as a wonderful employer, promoting a good work atmosphere and benefits. However, employees in our focus groups argued that the claims were untrue. Further investigation revealed that the employment conditions described in the advertising weren't available at all locations, and the campaign was scrapped. This saved the organization money and kept it from alienating one of its brand's most important assets — its employees.

The Power Behind Your Brand

Employees put a face on a corporate brand — to consumers, the community and prospective employees. Simply put, engaged and motivated employees who understand the brand and where it is going translates into happy customers. Helping employees to feel equipped and motivated to support the organization's brand is one of the most effective ingredients in building market share. ■

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